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Voices of Women in the Field: A Voice from Temple University

Shari J. Clarke

To understand the significance of my arrival at Temple University, it is essential to understand the places I have been in my career; the geographic locations, cultures and communities where I have lived and developed my leadership skills. In order to professionally evolve, I had to immerse my life, and as a result, the lives of my family, into the multitude of towns, boroughs and cities where we have resided.

I grew up the elder of two daughters in a middle class, African American family in a suburb of Toledo, Ohio. I could see the towers of the University of Toledo when standing in my driveway. Our neighborhood, during the late 1960s, and 1970s, was on the “right side of the tracks” for African Americans. In my close-knit group of friends, we attended church regularly, respected authority, studied hard, loved to party and to shop. It was a time of awakening to the rights of women and the emergence of equality for blacks. It was never a question of “Are you going to College” but “Where are you going to College?” Education was the prize we all valued.

During course studies for my Masters Degree in College Student Personnel, I became well aware of the inequities facing students of color. I questioned why there was a lack of diverse faculty, noted the absence of women in certain disciplines, and was struck by the unspoken fear and disdain when the terms multiculturalism, diversity, or minority were mentioned. It was during this period that I knew I would focus my work in higher education on advocating for change, supporting difference, and enhancing equality for all university students.

Having served as a Director, Associate Dean, and Associate to the President for diversity and equity, it is fitting that I journeyed to towns and cities that needed my skill set and expertise. So great is my passion for diversity, fairness, and inclusion that I spent decades educating students, faculty, and staff on the how and why to understand diversity.

My career journey reads like a road map. Starting in the Pacific Northwest in Walla Walla, Washington; followed by positions in Orono, Maine; Lincoln, Nebraska; and Pennsylvania. I was afforded incredible opportunities to work in environments that wanted diversity at the forefront. My family and I were welcomed into communities where we were one of a precious few black faces; if not the only black faces. After years of being in small or mid-sized isolated communities with black families accounting for less than 4% of the population, my career journey has taken me to the 5th largest

About the Author

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city in the United States with a cultural representation that includes 43% African Americans within its vast diversity. This is a first for me in my professional career.

When I arrived to interview for the Associate Vice President for Student Affairs position at Temple University during the summer of 2006, I was well aware that my life had taken a different direction. The environment here is the most extraordinary of any of the places that I have experienced in 18 years of higher education. I feel that at last the components of the previous years have brought me to this dynamic educational institution in this historic city where the past and the future align in perfect harmony.

Temple University is the destination I have been preparing for my entire career. Temple, a major urban research university, is located in the heart of North Philadelphia. It is a unique mecca that embodies town and gown. Temple and North Philadelphia present educational opportunities that benefit both campus and the community. With 4,000 freshman students, this class is reflective of the diversity of the city of Philadelphia. Temple's freshman class represents 39 states and 101 nations. One out of three students identifies as a person of color. *The Princeton Review's* annual *Best Colleges Guide* ranks Temple's student body among the most socially and ethnically diverse in the nation.

Outside my office window are the sights and sounds of a vibrant city. I take in every aroma, the swoosh of the subway, throngs of people, lights from the city's skyscrapers, multitudes of languages, music heard on the streets, and culture within a matter of minutes. Philadelphia is ideal for an education with businesses and corporations strongly represented in a city filled with history, and broad representations of socio-economic status.

An initial walk on the Temple University campus and one is met by an explosion of electricity. This campus is alive. Perhaps there are remnants of Benjamin Franklin and his experiments with electricity, but whatever the cause the feeling of vivacity and excitement for learning is palpable here.

Colleagues and friends have stated that "I work in purpose." In fact, work is a natural extension of who I am, it is my passion. I have yet to encounter a hardship or a task that has made it difficult for me to get up in the morning and to be on the job. I have found that my philosophy for work has magnified being at Temple University.

The exterior of the Temple University campus is a study in dichotomies. Graffiti, urban life-style, scenes of African American culture, hair-braid-

ing, food trucks offering Caribbean, barbecue, and Asian fare dot the landscape of the campus and the city. Philly culture is reflected in the signs encouraging you to sample the best cheesesteak, tour the 2,700 murals located around the city, or to simply stop and appreciate the breathtaking architecture. Masses of people are everywhere. Within the heart of the city, street scenes, and multiple activities are the stately buildings of Temple's campus. Ivy covered buildings, the renowned Fox School of Business, and the College of Law are located within the beautifully landscaped grounds of Temple University. First class technology abounds and the Welcome Center is a model in merging the best of technology with the academic needs of college students. Within these academic portals are students eager to learn from premiere professors, scholars, and researchers eager to impart knowledge.

Temple is a place that believes in its mission of providing access to a quality education. Founder Dr. Russell Conwell spoke of Temple providing education to the "acres of diamonds." Those diamonds are the people of Philadelphia the region and beyond. Temple University is a part of the community and has implemented innovative programs that reflect that partnership.

For the first time in my entire career I am in a city that offers a life of culture, art, music, education and community involvement. I am no longer isolated by race, I am one of many. There is a saying here that reflects this great city: "Philly is a place that loves you back." If this is indeed the case then I am well loved . . . because at long last I am at home.